

Rabbi Alex Kress  
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## Sermon

I remember the moment I started believing in God. It was magical, but in a cerebral sense - not a supernatural one. It unlocked so much that had been hidden away, buried in a safe beneath layers and layers of cynicism and ego. When I had that a-ha moment, I was forever changed.

But before I tell you about that, I want you to take a moment to close your eyes, and think about this question: Do you believe in God?

What image of God did you conjure up?  
Was it a supernatural, anthropomorphic God who lives in heaven above and fiddles with the trivialities of human life? Was it Morgan Freeman and his handsome baritone? Or was it something personal - a deep connection with the divine that just makes sense to you?

Living in a multicultural society like ours, and one that's predominantly non-Jewish, means that religious lines blur and sometimes complicated ideas are reduced to elementary levels. And when we're talking about

something as complex and personal as God, all the more so.

Growing up, I thought the Torah and our liturgy was meant to be taken literally - no one really told me otherwise. As I read through the *Machzor* year after year, I wondered if people actually believed in this God who played so many conflicting roles: the judge, the plaintiff, the counselor, the witness.

I wondered if they thought they were literally passing, like sheep, beneath God's staff in those moments of High Holy Day Prayer.

I wondered if they thought Avinu Malkeinu - our Father, our King - was actually a father or a king listening to their prayers.

And then, when I was 14, a rabbi at Jewish summer camp let me off the hook, offered me the easy path away from wrestling with our tradition, wrestling with theology, wrestling with our liturgy and Torah. He asked a bunch of us if we believed in God and after everyone around the circle answered, it came back to him and he said, "I don't believe in God." For years I lazily accepted that. "The rabbi doesn't believe in God?! Good enough for me."

Until I took a class in college - ironically titled Secular Judaism - that introduced me to Baruch Spinoza, the 17th century Dutch Philosopher. I remember it so clearly - I was on the left side of the classroom, somewhere in the middle, staring out the window at a tree blowing in the cold fall wind, when my professor said, "God is everything."

My eyes snapped back to the professor: "What? Like plastic?" I said skeptically.

"Well not really," he responded, "More that God is nature naturing, God is the universe and the way it unravels by its own necessity."

My skepticism evaporated and, at 20, I had just heard the first piece of theology that made any sense to me.

The deeper I dug, the more Spinoza unlocked for me. He wrote the Torah was "erroneous, mutilated, corrupt and inconsistent." Cool - I thought - I think that too! He wrote that the books of the Hebrew Bible "were not written by one man alone, nor for the common people of a single period, but by a large number of men, of different temperaments and at different times."

He then takes to task those writers, who "express themselves so inappropriately about God, attributing

hands and feet, and eyes and ears, and movement in space, as well as mental emotions, such as being jealous, merciful, etc., and depicting God as a judge sitting on a royal throne in heaven.”

And while I related to all of this, I still wondered then, what was the purpose of the High Holy Days, of the Torah, of prayer?

It took me many years - and quite honestly rabbinical school - to make sense of it all. With time, I found other understandings of the divine within our tradition that made sense and I slowly pieced together a personal theology that works for me.

God is not a person or a thing. God is the love we share, God is sitting around the table and sharing a home cooked meal; God is belly laughs and nostalgia. God is our fellowship when we feed the hungry and when we comfort the bereaved. God is a deep breath and the beauty of nature. God is in the care we show for others. God is our hugs to our children. God is our conscience and our hands as we work to repair this broken world.

The God of our Machzor, The God of our Torah, The God of our Siddur – that God is a tool that our tradition employs to arouse our kishkes, to inspire our souls, to repair our

character, to instruct our morality. The vivid imagery of God as a judge, or of God as a shepherd, of God as a monarch - it evokes feelings deep within us, rousing our dormant souls in a way only imagination and poetry and metaphor can. When we take those lessons that ignite our conscience, when we follow the moral compass instilled in us through mitzvot, prayer, and Torah - that is where we meet God.

Since the book of Bereshit (Genesis), our tradition has wrestled with the divine. The term, Am Yisrael, often simply translated as the People of Israel, more literally translates to the people that wrestle with God, or the people that persevere with God. That tradition is in our Jewish DNA and at no point in Jewish history have we all accepted any one particular theology. It evolves, personally and collectively and always has.

This fall, we'll be exploring many Jewish theologies in a class on Sunday mornings called, "Is Judaism God-Optional?" We'll survey texts from the Torah until today in an attempt to evolve our personal and collective theologies in the wake of the pandemic, in light of our ongoing pursuit of justice, and in response to all the many lived experiences we bring to the table.

I hope you'll join us, but at bare minimum, I hope the next time you're asked about God, you'll pause for a moment and say: "Funny you should ask - I've actually been wrestling with this quite a bit."